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Official touts Great Places initiative Iowa plan is designed to help areas develop special qualities

by MARY RAE BRAGG

Great ideas can have a tough time surviving bureaucratic bulwarks.

With that in mind, Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack earlier this year called for his department heads to take a first tough step in removing barriers to creative civic thinking. The step meant getting department directors together to talk; something that Anita Walker said turned the hierarchy upside down.

"Let me tell you, it's not easy to work together," said Walker, director of the Department of Cultural Affairs. "That meeting began with a lot of body language saying don't touch my stuff."

But with the help of a facilitator, Walker said administrators overcame the territorial urge and began brainstorming on how they could encourage Iowans to create, literally, Great Places.

The Great Places initiative that Vilsack created by executive order in January is designed to bring together state government resources to help neighborhoods, communities or regions develop the qualities that make those areas special. The hope is that it will work to support the Vision Iowa and the Iowa Values Fund economic development programs.

Walker was in Dubuque Friday, on a tour of the state to introduce the concept and promote the series of regional forums that will get the initiative started.

The forum in Dubuque will take place May 23 at the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium.

Although Walker said Dubuque is a city that "has already recognized how special it is," development of America's River on the waterfront and beginning downtown restoration can't be the end.

"The minute you decide you are a great place, that's about the last minute you will be," Walker said. "As great as we think we all are, we must constantly be focused on what we have yet to do."

The May 23 meeting will allow Dubuque-area residents to take part in an interactive brainstorming session that Walker hopes will draw both movers and shakers and those whose voices aren't normally heard, such as college students and minorities.

The Great Places 2005 timeline calls for applicants to send "invitations" to the state by July 1. In July and August, "coaches" from state agencies will work with the applicants to get their proposals ready for presentation in September.

In October, a citizen advisory council appointed by Vilsack will help select three of the proposals to be pilot "places," with final partnership agreements in place by the end of the year.

Having seen how reticent government departments can be in cooperating with one another, Walker said the hardest part of developing proposals for some places might be in getting multiple jurisdictions to work together. But it is that kind of "outside the box" thinking that Great Places wants to develop, she said.

The state's part in the agreement will be to assist financially and develop "one-stop shopping" assistance for those trying to figure out what role the various governmental departments may play.

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